

I strongly and unequivocally support the recommendations concerning early learning and childcare made by "Thrive by Five" in the response to the Draft Report of the Commission "Early Childhood and Care" issued 23 November 2023. They are amongst the best I have read in this area.

I have researched education issues for 20 years and published a book "[Education Reform: the Unwinding of Intelligence and Creativity](#)" (Springer 2014). I have also researched associated issues including the contribution parents make to successful early learning. Relevant essays on my website include the following: [Early Childhood: A World of Relationships](#), [Early Childhood: The Nature of Early Experiences](#) and [Early Childhood: Critical Relationships with the Mother](#).

Important findings have emerged from decades of research by established experts in both education and public policy.

Learning commences at birth, not when the child starts school. The first 5 or so years is the time of greatest growth of the brain and of cognitive development. Participation in early learning is pivotal to successful learning in school and beyond.

The learning outcomes of these early years are strongly influenced by the socioeconomic background of the parents: children of less advantaged families gain far less than do children of advantaged families. The difference is due principally to the role that families play, the interaction with the children, the extent and variety of stimulating experiences and learning opportunities which the children can participate in. The difference shows up for instance in vocabulary: less advantaged children build their vocabularies at slower rates. By age 3 more affluent children will have heard approximately 30 million more words than children from less affluent families.

Numerous carefully planned and managed research has for years demonstrated that children from less advantaged families given the opportunity to attend early learning centres staffed by professional skilled experts gain substantially in all measures of learning. Amongst the critical aspects are the involvement of professional early childhood educators. Children looked after by their grandparents or other relatives do not gain to the same level as those who attended the centres.

There is another vitally important aspect: children from more advantaged backgrounds actively involved in play, which is where learning occurs, develop their intrinsic motivation. They want to learn because they enjoy it, not because of any extrinsic influence. Play is learning. If children are happy they are learning, as research has shown

The overall conclusions are that a successful community is one where people are well educated. That depends significantly on the experiences of early childhood. The gain is to the community generally and therefore government funding is appropriate. Clearly that applies to all children.

Therefore the recommendations that 3 days a week of early learning and childcare for every child aged 0-5 years is absolutely appropriate. Further, 100% free early learning and childcare for lower income families is essential.

Two issues arise: the ability of families to place their children in early childhood and care centres and the availability of appropriately run and staffed centres. Right now, in Australia, parents from less affluent families have difficulty affording appropriate childcare. To gain a subsidy the parent must be employed or engaged in education: this is called the activity test. The requirement is absolutely offensive: it is based on the proposition that the parent, usually the mother, only contributes to the community when

employed. Childcare and other home duties are unpriced. Were they counted it would be obvious that the primary career, usually the mother, contributes far more than the employed parent, usually the father. The activity test is unreasonably discriminatory and must be abolished!

The second issue is the funding of the centres. Childcare, like aged care and disability support, has been assigned in part to the private sector: private providers, including venture capital firms, have been able to bid for enrolments with the result that fees are often extremely high and uncontrolled. Funding arrangements must take this into account: provision of funds to the parents means the fees will increase with the level of support. Instead the support should go to the centres.

But more importantly, the numbers of sufficiently qualified staff are significantly inadequate. Therefore a major program of workforce recruitment and training is essential. As in other areas, workforce planning has been ignored.

This area is so important that it is appropriate that a new independent Early Childhood Education and Care Commission to support, advise and monitor governments' progress towards universal access to ECEC should be established and funded.

Early learning should be inclusive of all children, including children with disability and from diverse cultural backgrounds.

There are two final points I wish to make. First, the oversighting should support and ensure adequate standards of operation are provided - and that should be the focus. On no account whatsoever should some form of standardised testing of participating children be contemplated. Testing does not benefit the child and replaces intrinsic motivation with a focus on extrinsic factors which then become the focus of policy as has happened the school sector with demonstrable negative outcomes including declining learning achievement.

Second, some may wish to assert that the universal provision of early childhood learning and care will mean that already advantaged families will benefit further. To limit the provision based on some kind of eligibility test adds huge costs to a system as has been obvious with the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Rather the fact that the more affluent families gain from this policy should be dealt with by tax arrangements. It is relevant to point out that arguments about eligibility are inclined to overlook existing advantages which can then become a focus of debate leading to the principal goals being lost!

In a recent media article Per Capita CEO Emma Dawson points out that Natsem modelling has found that more than 80% of the value of the capital gains tax discount, and half of the value of negative gearing deductions, go to those households in the top fifth of income earners. Per Capita estimates these two concessions combined, for property investors alone, will cost the budget as much as \$18bn this year.